

## Site Visit to Ek Kadam/Apna Ghar Jan. 2017

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I visited Ek Kadam/Apna Ghar on Jan. 10, 2017 for about four hours. I reached Apna Ghar at around noon and was greeted by Mahesh ji, the children who stay at Apna Ghar, and also some girls who attend Apna Skool which is also run on the premises for children of migrant brick-laying workers. Upon reaching, I was greeted with traditional Indian aarti thali and tika. Then Mahesh ji took me on a tour of the premises, showing me the office, the main hall, the aangan, the mess hall, and finally the boys' rooms. We all congregated in one of the rooms and over an hour-long conversation, I learned about the democratic structure by which the boys who live in Apna Ghar manage their responsibilities and share the workload cooperatively. I also read poems written by some of the children and learned more about their life stories.



Apna Ghar is a beautiful red structure, kept spotlessly clean and maintained well by its residents. Apna Ghar is alive with the energy and creativity of the children and the staff that live and work there. There are several activities that children participate in and then in turn use their lessons to make their 'home' more hospitable. For instance, the children learned tribal art and then displayed their artwork on the premises of their residential hostel/home.

The children take the initiative to carry out several innovative projects on site. This includes a traditional hut that they made entirely through their own labors, as well as swimming that they dug out to keep themselves cool during hot summer days. The results are that this home is more than just a hostel for the residents. They truly seem to have taken ownership of maintaining the facilities and improving them.





Mahesh ji and the children also grow vegetables in a plot. The entire premises were an agricultural field before it was purchased for its present purposes. The previous owner, a smiling old man that I met during my visit, still lives on the premises and provides guidance in the cultivation and harvesting of the crops. The harvests supplement the food that is used in the community kitchen and mess in meals' preparation.

## Challenges

The children at Apna Ghar are facing many challenges. Many of them are directly and indirectly impacted by alcoholism which seems to be an endemic problem in migrant families. From what I understood, contractors often get the families into debt by getting them addicted to alcohol which they sell to the families. Once one or both of the parents become dependant on alcohol, it is nearly impossible for them to break out of the cycle of loans and debts, turning them into bonded labor. Some of the students have even lost one or both parents who succumbed to illnesses caused by their alcoholism. According to Mahesh ji and the children themselves, the children try to educate and sensitize their families to the perils of alcoholism when they visit their homes, but it's an uphill task. They hope to prevent the addiction from impacting the next generation -- their siblings. Another challenge is that students are unable to study when they go home for a visit. Sometimes, that results in a lag when they return and then they have to catch up in order to maintain their performances at school.

Mahesh ji wished to take me to the parents' homes but due to time constraints, we were unable to do so. I hope to meet the parents on my next visit. We all got together for a group photograph at the end.

